UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

PROGRAMME: No. 663, recorded 14 March 1997

GUEST: **Amb. Alvin Adams**
President and Chief Executive Officer
United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA)

JOURNALISTS: Paul Lewis, *The New York Times*
Bhaskar Menon, *International Documents Review*

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UNA-USA

Crisis and Reform in United Nations Financing, a recent report by the United Nations Association of the United States of America, or UNA-USA, covers a number of issues of special concern to the world organization and the United States. Ambassador Alvin Adams, President and Chief Executive Officer of UNA-USA, elaborates on the relationship between the United Nations and the United States Administration, Congress and Senate as well as American public opinion towards the United Nations. Ambassador Adams suggest a number of steps the United Nations should take to restore the reliability of its assessment system.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
Executive Producer:	Kamil Taha
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The debate over the financial crisis and reform of the United Nations has intensified in the last few years. And while the world organization has taken a number of significant steps to put its house in order, a few countries — among them the largest contributor, the United States of America — still owe the United Nations and its agencies over a billion dollars in overdue assessments for both the regular and peace-keeping budgets. Why are these countries not paying their dues in full and on time? And does this position accurately reflect public opinion of the world organization? These issues and others are discussed in a comprehensive report recently issued by the United Nations Association of the United States of America. Our guest today, Ambassador Alvin Adams, is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Association. Joining me to talk with Ambassador Adams are Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Paul Lewis of *The New York Times*.

Ambassador Adams, welcome to World Chronicle.

ADAMS: Thank you, sir.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador, we've asked the question whether the withholding of funds from the United Nations reflects a negative attitude toward the Organization by, in the case of the United States, the American people. But of course other countries also owe the UN money, quite considerable amounts, in some cases. Your polls by the UN Association of the United States have consistently shown that the American people are still overwhelming supportive of the United Nations. Now, speaking personally, and I've travelled a good deal around the United States, I'm a little sceptical about those reports. I was recently, for example, in Florida, and driving in from the airport there was a huge billboard alongside the main highway which said "Get US out of the United Nations and the United Nations out of the United States". Admittedly it was sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, which is not exactly a friend of the United Nations, but talking to people in the local community I did not detect great enthusiasm for the UN, although the people I talked to were what you might say was reasonably liberal. Now, how do you account for that discrepancy?

ADAMS: Well, I just point out that, what, some 36 years ago we had billboards also in the United States, this time sponsored by the John Birch Society, calling for basically the same thing. We go through periods of doubt and challenge to an American presence overseas, because this really is a stand-in issue, it's a strawman issue for America's role in the world beyond our frontiers, and I'll tell you, I have confidence that the outcome will be positive when the time comes for people to vote on the issue of paying our arrears in Washington.

This is, I think, a defining moment in our foreign policy for the next good number of years. And if we win this debate, I think that will strengthen our posture, and the Organization's, and the structure that we're all working with. And if we lose it, it will do double damage to it.

MENON: Last year you had a — the UNA actually asked individual Americans to send in money as a sign of support for the UN.

ADAMS: Seven dollars, yes.

MENON: And how did that go?

ADAMS: Well, I'd say that about 50 — sorry, $75,000. I mean, we weren't expecting everybody to —

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that still happening? Are you still getting —

ADAMS: Yes, it still is, it still is. There's a good deal of interest in the press, and — the idea was John Whitehead's, a former Deputy Secretary of State and our Chairman —

LITTLEJOHNS: Who is your Chairman now.

ADAMS: Chairman. And it caught the public's attention. But hardly is that the mechanism to pay our debt, which is a legal obligation, and we ought to do it.

MENON: No, but there seems to be the idea, I think Michael hit on a fact which has to be faced, which is that while the people who are opposed to the UN are vocal and seem to have money to put up huge billboards and then, you know, dominate the talk shows on radio, the supporters of the UN seem to think that someone else will do the job. How do you —

LITTLEJOHNS: Such as UNA-USA.

MENON: Right, such as UNA-USA.

ADAMS: With help from a number of other people. And I think you're quite right that the debate has been dominated by a vocal minority, and the silent majority basically, as Americans, are frankly much more interested in what is going on in their own metropolitan areas, a bit more in the States, somewhat less so in Washington, and when you come to the world at large, it's pretty hard. Basically, if you're dealing with a foreign policy issue, you have to count a great deal upon the administration and upon the President to provide the political cover and the leadership to explain to the public, draw their attention to an issue, and seek to mobilize them so that the dictum that all politics is local does not determine what our foreign policy is, because our foreign interests are certainly much larger than the politics of Oshkosh, Wisconsin or New York City.

LEWIS: So what sort of changes do you think the UN should make to get money from Congress, to endear itself to Congress? What has to be done here?

ADAMS: Well, in our report here, we could go through some of the conclusions there. It's not likely to be what Congress would want to see, or some in Congress whose votes

are important to the outcome of the issue. If you're asking me to speculate a little bit, kind of a sixth sense of what I think, enough congressmen will need to vote right on this, I would expect that they would want to see a somewhat reduced budget and a somewhat reduced American contribution too in terms of the rate of assessment to the United Nations, and efforts, significant efforts to cut the staff more. Now, I understand the argument, but those are just technical details, it doesn't deal with substance, it doesn't really deal with the coordination, the mechanism, the output, but I'm afraid when it gets to certain political levels they look only at the irreducible common denominator, the bottom line, the number of people, how high the budget is. And beyond that I'm not sure if you get much more. What I would hope, very much so, is that the appropriation does not contain a check list by law of gates through which this institution must pass before it receives tranche A and then tranche B and then tranche C. I think that would be, in my own sense of 30 years in diplomacy as an American Foreign Service officer, kind of counterproductive. Maybe you could have made an argument about that years past; I'm not sure I would even then. But I would say in today's world, with an impulse of transparency and accountability, that I think you're seeing emerging in a number of member Governments, partly maybe as a result of the youth of the new leadership, of bad experience with economic planning, maybe some American education possibly in all of that, I think you're seeing that attitude reflected more in UN missions and in the Secretariat, which means a greater receptivity to change and to the basic principle that you can't do everything, you can't please everybody, you have to make choices, and you have to be careful in your management.

So what I'm basically saying is that if you want to talk about a debate or a campaign, and "we" and "they", which I don't like to, but for the purpose of our chat, we've won. Because the proposition I think is much more broadly established. Therefore the time has come for us to accept yes for an answer, and not to push it down people's throats.

MENON: Secretary of State Albright, when she was Ambassador here, at one point said to a group of correspondents that in her time over here she had seen the Republican conservatives in Congress actually begin to back down on the UN issue. She said the first hearing she attended in Congress was a huge room filled with cameras and newsmen, and the Republicans were out in force criticising the UN, and as the months went by and the years went by the room got smaller and smaller and the number of people attending it grew smaller and smaller, until finally she was across a table with this one Republican congressman, who was — [LAUGH]

ADAMS: Who she really had to deal with.

MENON: Yes. So is this in fact true? Does this mean that the UN will have an easier time of this?

ADAMS: Not necessarily. Not necessarily. But there are differences in the situation today that were not true last year. We have a new Secretary-General, a very respected figure; a new Secretary of State who has a well-established position with respect to the United Nations; and a new ambassador here, who is a very savvy man with a long political career. I think those are three important pluses. I think as well there's a greater sense of mobilization by those who do care about our interests overseas, that they are indeed put very seriously at risk by a failure to appropriate the resources needed. I think therefore you find greater leadership on the one hand — the President has spoken and continues to speak on the topic, whereas in years past maybe he was not as vocal — and I think those who do believe we have a positive role to play overseas, whether it's in terms of our information programmes or our aid programmes or our business interests, they are I think quite concerned that a continuation of a situation in which the 150 account, which is our international relations account, has dropped from some $32 billion in 1986 to $18 billion last year is disastrous. We cannot sustain that.

LEWIS: Yes, and at the same time of course you have people like Senator Helms calling for a 50 per cent cut in the UN staff. That's a death sentence.

ADAMS: Yes. However, one probably should take many things said on the floor of the Congress with a sense of context and perspective, and what is the opening position is not necessarily the closing position.

LITTLEJOHNS: Senator Helms has also spoken about setting benchmarks, so-called, to enable him to recommend that the Congress pay up the overdue cash. What do you think of this idea of benchmarks?

ADAMS: Well, it depends how you define benchmarks. If they are conditions explicit —

LITTLEJOHNS: What's your understanding of benchmarks?

ADAMS: Well, I think — my sense of benchmarks is probably different from those who want to use benchmarks as conditions. I think benchmarks are indications of where you want to be in a general sense of time. They're not legally binding; they are by way of a strategy, a roadmap, where in transparency you indicate to the public and your constituencies, yes, we'd like to reduce the budget by this amount, and yes, we'd like to reduce staff by that amount, and yes, maybe we could do without that particular committee, or maybe we could coordinate in this way. I think the public is owed, certainly, a sense, and the members are owed, a sense of direction. They are mileposts, let's say, on a road. They are not — I think that is a sense, frankly, that the Secretary-General brings to the discussion. I think he is misunderstood by some in Congress who would have those benchmarks as explicit conditions precedent to payment of various tranches.

LITTLEJOHNS: The main priority presumably would be to get the contributions people in the United Nations to reduce the American assessment. Is that so?

ADAMS: Well, I can't speak for Congress. Certainly it will be one of the things they'll be looking at. We now are at 25 per cent for the regular budget and at 31.6 per cent, I think, for peace-keeping, but Congress has legislated 25 [per cent] there. Our report here addresses both of those questions. And instead of an arbitrary fixing — by the length of the chancellor's foot, if you will, the principle of equity in law — of what the outcome should be, we tried to come up with some formulas which we think are plausible and objectively sustainable. Under both, our rate of assessment would drop. Under peace-keeping, we come up with a formula that would drop it from 31.6 [per cent] to something like 26.7 [per cent], something like that, and on the regular assessment it would drop from 25 — I can't recall the exact figure — probably shy of the 20 per cent which the administration is seeking.

MENON: Something that surprises me, and I think your report mentions this, is that in a country where law is supposed to be supreme — how can a country like the United States ignore its treaty obligations? This is probably second I think in your legal system to the Constitution itself, a treaty obligation.

ADAMS: Papa, a good question. And indeed, it's inconsistent, and indeed, it is a serious breach in a proposition that I for 30 years as an American diplomat espoused in every country under instructions I served. We are a nation of laws: that's what keeps us together; it's what perhaps distinguishes us from many other countries. And I'm afraid that the precedents that we are establishing, and the misconduct with respect to practising what we preach, are infecting the attitudes of others, so that whereas 10 years ago there were possibly 6, as I recall, countries whose vote had been suspended in the General Assembly, there are now something like 40.

MENON: Yes, 43.

ADAMS: And the debt has grown. I mean, we're not the only debtor! As you say, we're about, what, $1.5 [billion] according to UN calculations, and we're, what, $3.2 [billion] I think is the total debt owed.

LITTLEJOHNS: It's down a bit now, it's about $2.9 [billion], I think.

ADAMS: It is appalling. And I can find no words other than that to describe it. I have to agree with you.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ambassador Alvin Adams, President and Chief Executive Officer of UNA-USA.

Ambassador Adams, Kofi Annan, the new UN Secretary-General, said the other day that he was astonished during his visit to Washington — when he met a number of members of the Congress including Senator Helms — that quite serious people took seriously these rather

fantastic stories about designs by the United Nations on the sovereignty of the United States, the alleged existence of black helicopters in Montana carrying out military manoeuvres, and so on. Is this really how these people in Washington look at the UN?

ADAMS: No! I mean, I expect you'll find 10 per cent everywhere, and I expect that there is at least that in terms of congressional representation that is not as fully informed as it should be, clearly, on the issue. When I travel around, I ask groups of people, "Have you heard about the black helicopter story?" I most recently was in San Antonio, and prior to that in Tucson, and in groups of 100 to 400, one to two hands would go up. I don't know where the story comes from, frankly; it is baloney, and, however, it is one that can capture the minds of people who are looking for excuses, for theories, to explain that which otherwise is difficult to understand, frankly.

MENON: You know, it reminds me of a story. Cathy Toups, who used to be the *Washington Times* correspondent over here, went back for a vacation to Texas, and her father, who was a conservative and very much to the right of her, said to her that the UN was completely useless, that it got the United States involved in all kinds of wars, including the Second World War! I mean, the level of ignorance out there is, you know, it's frightening.

MENON: But, you know, you have levels of ignorance in many countries. And what compensates for that is the quality of the national leadership, the sense that motivates those people of an appreciation for our foreign interests, the very fact that something like 20 per cent of our labour force is involved in export industry. Now, that is a fundamental piece of the picture, and therefore the conditions of trade, the disposable income in other countries, the market policies of those countries, the degree of stability or turmoil in other countries should be of direct interest to a significantly larger number of people than appears to be the case.

LITTLEJOHNS: But, Ambassador, these congressmen and senators are the leadership. I mean, if they believe this nonsense, why, how can you blame the American people?

ADAMS: Yes, the leadership, but paralleling that leadership is the leadership of the President of the United States and the administration, and the leadership of the House and of the Senate, and of the respective committees, maybe not all of them. But I would wager that the large majority of those people have a pretty good understanding of the facts as I have just explained them and of the United Nations. You'll always find people, because politics is local, appealing to perhaps less than noble local political interests to advance a case which is fantastical in terms of what the truth is. But they do it on many other issues too.

MENON: But isn't there a failure of media here? I mean, you've got a report like this, which contains an enormous amount of information, and yet I haven't seen a single news story on it.

ADAMS: Well, there've been one or two that slipped your gimlet eye. And don't necessarily expect to see headlines about the issue, because, as a serious journalist, I think you know that guys and girls will take those stories and maybe squirrel them away and use them another day.

MENON: Later on.

ADAMS: Failure of media — depends what media you're talking about, I suppose.

MENON: Well, it's — let me rephrase that....

LITTLEJOHNS: No, wait a minute, Paul Lewis is *The New York Times*, let him respond.

LEWIS: No. But no, I was going to say that I think it's a great pity that the debate in Congress doesn't focus much more on making the UN machinery work better instead of focusing almost exclusively on saving money.

ADAMS: That's a much more difficult proposition, perhaps.

LEWIS: Far, far more difficult. I mean, do we actually want three agricultural agencies in Rome, and things like that. Then it's worth —

ADAMS: Two human rights agencies, and the ECOSOC, and all the regional....

LEWIS: Then it's worth pointing out that the UN employs 9,000 people here, in Vienna and Geneva. The Congressional staff alone is 16,000.

ADAMS: And do you know that there are more practising attorneys in the city of New York than there are employees of the whole UN system, all the specialized agencies, and the World Bank? And probably *The New York Times*! But I'll tell you, Paul, just to set an example, even *The New York Times*, there was a story a couple of months ago when the Guatemalan negotiations had borne fruit, and there was — the story was announcing that fact, they were about to sign something. Throughout the story, I didn't see one reference to the United Nations. But the fact of the matter is, the UN helped broker that.

LEWIS: Oh, yes, definitely, yes.

ADAMS: I think if the press who write on this were more conscious maybe of the need to cite the UN where it's played a role.... Another example: A lot of discussion about Rwanda, about six weeks ago, and the Canadians proposed for multilateral — for a UN force. Headlines on the front page, again in *The New York Times*, no reference to a UN group. It was more like a multilateral Canadian kind of thing, with Americans, or maybe not. So, I mean, it's an eternal frustration with me, and I know it is — having been in federal service for 30 years, you present the story, and it's not up to you to decide what gets published and what doesn't. Think it's redundant and irrelevant in some ways. Because I'd like to know of those who get their news is their source more radio, is it more television, is it more publications such as *The Times* or any written media, print. I suspect it's much — I think the facts will probably

show that it's much more electronic, and of that, probably radio has a very significant role with respect to opinion.

LITTLEJOHNS: The talk shows, for instance.

ADAMS: Talk shows, with respect to opinion. Maybe that's exaggerated. But I think it may also reflect, sadly so, a declining rate of adult literacy in the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, most of the talk show people seem to be — talk show hosts — seem to be rather negative about the UN.

ADAMS: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: I mean, wouldn't you agree that that is the case?

ADAMS: My sense of it is, yes. And, you know, it's much easier to beat up and to be dramatic about that and to have a colourful opinion about what is seen to be something that was as established as motherhood for a while. Perhaps we took this too long for granted.

MENON: No, I think the UN is actually an easy victim, because it's filled with boring people, or what pass for boring people, because they're essentially diplomats, they hate to be newsworthy in any sense, they pride themselves on secrecy, they're not —

ADAMS: You need some colourful people at the UN, A; and B, I think — not for me to give everybody advice, but you all are asking — a more vigorous, more focused, sharper public relations effort. Part of the United Nations. There is, for example, just one, as I understand it, auxiliary office of the United Nations in the United States, and that's in Washington. And if I — again, you know, if you had the resources, I suppose it would be the first point you'd all make, but San Francisco could stand one, and Los Angeles, and maybe in Chicago, and maybe in Atlanta.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the UN don't have the funds for it, partly because the United States doesn't pay its dues.

ADAMS: That's true, that's true. But between priorities that would have a pretty high priority. If you're dealing with the public views of your largest contributor, I think you try to make — cobble together some sort of —

LITTLEJOHNS: But your chapters are doing the job for the UN, aren't they?

ADAMS: Well, no, not that we're doing it for the — what we're doing is what we think is in the national interest.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, in a sense you are. I mean, UNA-USA is a great supporter of the UN.

ADAMS: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: So your chapters presumably are composed of people who have some kind of commitment to the UN idea.

ADAMS: But more precisely, the mission of UNA-USA is to promote American leadership in the United Nations. We take no funding from the United States Government nor from the United Nations, and we're in a position therefore to criticise both when criticism is due, and we have.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where does your funding come from mainly, by the way?

ADAMS: Well, foundations give us grants, on the one hand; membership dues, it's $25 a year....

LITTLEJOHNS: How many members do you have?

ADAMS: About 25,000, something like that now. And about 175 chapters all around the country. Do a lot of travelling myself. And then a significant portion comes from unrestricted giving by members of the board of directors.

MENON: What's the age group like of your membership?

ADAMS: My age and older, by and large. But there —

MENON: Young people, no?

ADAMS: There are fewer, but that I think is changing. As I travel around I'm impressed also by the presence of youth and the efforts by people of my generation to try to bring youth in, put them in the leadership positions, on the board of directors, for each of the chapters. It's only natural. One of the phenomena is who has time these days for public service, not-for-profit organizations, volunteer organizations in this country, when everybody is working, wives are working, sometimes in two jobs, because they're part-time jobs, and they don't have the full social security benefits, the health benefits. Who's got the time? Not them. Women in this country used to I think be the heart and soul of a lot of the volunteer organizations, and it's very difficult to do that, so it's the older folks who are retired and may have the time, on the one hand, but on the other, they have lived the United Nations and its history for 50 years. In many cases, they've lived World War II, they have a commitment to really what the UN was created to avoid. And they lived the cold war. And I think they have a personal sense of affinity to the UN, an emotional commitment, which is hard to rise in younger people on lots of different issues, and not just the UN.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have any kind of program going in the schools and colleges which —

ADAMS: Oh, yes. We certainly do. We have what's called the model UN programme, which is a simulation in debate of a Security Council or General Assembly debate, and kids form into teams, and they're representing different countries. There are probably 100,000 students in the United States at high school level and some in college level that are involved in that work. We'd like to do more of that. We would like to also work on how we

could work with school text publishers and authors, to introduce a little bit more knowledge into the basic textbooks in social studies and civics studies on what the United Nations is.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you feel it's having an effect on the youth of the United States? Making them more interested in the UN?

ADAMS: Well, it's a continuing process. Put it that way. Some things we simply have to do. If we did more of it and more kids were exposed to what are values that are essential not only for foreign relations but also for community relations, I mean, tolerance, reason, debate, dialogue, working this out somehow other than through violence — this is critical.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Adams, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Alvin Adams, President and Chief Executive Officer of UNA-USA. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Paul Lewis of *The New York Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

* * * * *

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York, 10017, USA.

World Chronicle is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA, or the UN Information Centre in your country.